



Letting go: writer Celia Dodd today (main image) and with her family when they were growing up  
RICHARD MILDENHALL

# The long goodbye

**Families** As a working mother, **Celia Dodd** found that the wrench of 'empty nest syndrome' took her by surprise. But she soon discovered she was not alone - and that this new phase of life has a definite plus side

**Y**esterday I got a call from my 19-year-old daughter Alice in Cambodia, who had been due home tomorrow, to say that she would be staying for another month. At first I can honestly say I felt what parents are supposed to when they're letting go: that it's great she's so independent, having such fabulous experiences, that she feels secure enough to go so far. She was the last of my three children to leave when she went to university last September, and because she's a few years younger than her brothers,

Adam, 24, and Paul, 26, I've been let into the empty nest gradually.

But today I just miss her. It's a horribly physical, queasy feeling, and there's no point even trying to be rational. Other mothers describe the same kind of visceral wrench: a hand goes to the heart as they say they feel bruised, ill, hollow, empty when a child leaves home.

But what did I expect? Bringing up children is such a physical business. I mourn the passing of an era, the loss of babies who breastfed, the toddlers who held my hand on the beach, who cuddled up and read *Alfie* on the sofa, who demanded all of my attention. And I miss their teenage selves, too - all that

hanging about, watching telly together, the chance conversations, the smell of them - that elusive mix of feet, fags, aftershave and Coco Mademoiselle.

Friends try to cheer you up by saying "they'll be back", or "you can always Skype them", but that misses the point. Of course technology helps, but it's no substitute for the real thing. Communication in our family is mostly non-verbal, and anyway you can't tell your child's mood from a text. I hate the fact that these days meetings have to be scheduled, and it always feels so poignant when afterwards the children go back to the new addresses they now call home. Some of my

saddest memories are of sitting tongue-tied in Starbucks in some university town, stuck in limbo before you have to say goodbye yet again.

The physical ache is there whether you work or not. This has been a revelation to my generation of working mothers. We're still stuck with the idea that the empty nest affects only a very traditional kind of housewife - someone like my own mum, who taught part-time but built her life around her husband and four children. As the youngest by a long chalk I observed how bereft she was when my siblings left home. And as a result I resolved, even before my children were born, to maintain a strong separate identity through my work. I assumed my career would insulate me from the isolation and redundancy associated with empty-nest syndrome.

It worked, but only up to a point. Full-blown empty-nest syndrome - debilitating grief and loss of purpose - is mercifully rare, but that doesn't mean the transition isn't still painful and complicated, as well as exciting and discomfounding. When I started interviewing parents for my book about the empty nest, it was clear that working mothers find it just as hard as stay-at-home mothers.

Umi Singh, who teaches creative writing, says: "I was really surprised by how absolutely bereft I felt when Jared and India left. I have always tried to keep my identity as a person as well as my identity as a mother. It wasn't just that I missed them, it was feeling that I had moved into a different phase of life. Despite having several part-time jobs and plenty of interests, my primary identity was being a mother."



This is in line with research in the 1970s by the American sociologist Lillian Rubin, which found that - contrary to received wisdom - stay-at-home mothers were generally pretty relieved when their children left. Of course they missed them for a while, but they'd had enough of mothering and were ready to move on to more "me time".

For mothers today the empty nest is less straightforward. Whether they work full-time, part-time or stay at home, women often feel less certain about the decisions they made than their mothers, whose choices were more limited. Once the children had gone, my own mother's life revolved around my father; her choices, such as they were, were dictated by his.

So for me regret about whether I made the right decision is a big part of the empty nest. I never regret not

## Coping strategies for the empty nest

■ Face your feelings. Have a good cry, go through the family albums and talk to someone you can rely on to be genuinely sympathetic, who won't just tell you to cheer up.

■ Practise being spontaneous - not always easy after years of organising your life around other people. If someone suggests a last-minute outing, don't automatically say no.

■ Allow yourself time to adjust to the notion of not being needed on a daily basis. It's fine to cling on to comforting routines for a while at least. Find new things to nurture - but don't get a dog just yet.

■ If you're married or with a partner, don't wait until the nest empties completely to discuss plans for the future and doing more together.

■ Dig out a selection of photos that don't feature your children: of friends and occasions you've enjoyed without them. It's a good reminder that it is perfectly possible to have a good time without the children.

■ When your child comes home, acknowledge that the relationship is now on a different footing. You can no longer expect them to say where they're going or what time they'll be home, although you can expect them to consider your feelings.

giving up work, but I do regret my dodgier decisions about childcare, spending so many weekends working and not taking the kids on more outings - I regret not enjoying them enough, basically. Overnight, I've turned into one of those middle-aged women who peer into pushchairs and warn young mums to make the most of it.

So the main impetus for writing my book was to find out what it means to parents now - fathers as well as mothers - and whether people still feel as I do, that it's a big deal. On the whole, they do: Rose summed it up when she said: "I'm not just some redundant menopausal woman who hasn't got anything better to do than

grieve for my children leaving home. What you go through when your children leave is so poignant and powerful, yet it's dismissed as being a bit cheesy. Even women who are going through the same thing sometimes make me feel energetically as if I'm signing up for my old-age pension. I want to acknowledge the past and the poignancy of my children leaving, but with optimism."

In other ways the empty nest is less straightforward for my generation, too. Back in the day, I couldn't wait to get away from my parents, whereas our children keep bouncing in and out of the nest and we want to stay closely involved in their lives. My son Adam has been living at home since he graduated last year and that suits me fine, not least because he's the middle child, so it's our only opportunity to live together without his siblings. But in the back of my mind there is always the thought that we'll have to say goodbye again some time and I keep hoping it won't be too soon. I know from the wrench when his older brother moved into his own flat that such permanent partings are on another level from when they're at university and still come home in the holidays.

But the empty nest is not all sadness and regret. Life goes on, and I've gradually found that this new phase can be weirdly exciting. I quite like feeling that the carpet's been pulled from under me. It makes you question everything: your relationships, your achievements, your work, how you enjoy yourself, how much time you waste on admin.

And like many empty nesters, now that the dust has settled, I've got more energy - energy which, almost without you realising it, has been absorbed by other people's emotional, physical and psychological needs for 20-odd years. Having less mess, cooking and laundry is only a small part of it. Jenni Stuart-Anderson, a rug designer and teacher whose only daughter Rhiannon first left seven years ago, explains: "I missed Rhiannon desperately for about a year, and I still do. But the compensation has been getting my time back, and managing my time in a completely different way. Children take up a lot of space, physically, emotionally, in every way. And when they're not there you get that space back."

Eight years into my empty nest, I'm still not sure whether I'll ever be as happy as I was when I had young children. But at least I've got over the initial feeling of purposelessness. It has been replaced by a new sense of urgency about making the most of whatever comes next, and I'm beginning to feel what the most contented empty nesters feel, that the time is right to move on. Well, just as soon as I've Skyped Alice in Cambodia, that is.

*'The Empty Nest: How to survive and stay close to your adult child' by Celia Dodd (Piatkus, £12.99)*

## My toughest case

'The boy came in alert. Hours later, his organs were packing up'



Dr Nellie Thwaites

I'm a consultant paediatrician and the case of a little boy who was about 18 months old really changed the course of my career. He had seemed a bit unwell and his mother had been anxious about him and taken him to the GP, who thought he simply had a viral illness. However, the boy's mother was unconvinced: he wasn't himself, he'd become pale, wasn't playing and his breathing was a bit funny.

She felt that this was very odd for him, so she brought him to St Mary's, the hospital where I was working as a paediatric intensive care registrar at the time.

When he came through the doors of the accident and emergency department he had developed one purple spot on his tummy. That is always very worrying in a child who is pale, irritable and has a fever, because it is the hallmark of a condition called meningococcal septicaemia, which often gets called meningitis - but it isn't meningitis, it's blood poisoning, which is much worse. One hundred years ago a doctor in America described it as an illness that slays more quickly than any other infection.

At the time the boy was still alert and communicating with his mother, but in a matter of hours we saw him transformed into a child with extreme multi-organ failure. A terrible black rash had appeared all over his body, his kidneys and breathing were packing up, his heart wasn't working properly.

But because he'd come through the doors of St Mary's, which at the time had a specialist intensive care unit for meningococcal infections, he was immediately put into the intensive care unit, where for the next 24 hours a battle ensued to stabilise him and save his life. What's terrible about this infection is a child can be alive and apparently stable one minute and dead the next, which is a really horrific thing for parents and doctors to see.

In the end he had a couple of amputations, a few fingers and a bit of his foot, but nothing that he couldn't cope with for the rest of his life. He was actually quite lucky because many children with this condition end up losing much more.

But seeing the speed of devastation made me want to know more about how this disease presents itself in the community, so I was funded by the Meningitis Research Foundation to do a big national project. From that work has come a lot of information which has been disseminated around the country and I think a lot of good has come from what was really a terrible case. I've been a doctor for 22 years now and there are some patients and experiences that you just don't forget.

*The Meningitis Research Foundation is petitioning the Government to add the new Meningitis B vaccine (when it has received its approval and license from the European Medicines Agency) to those recommended for all infants. [www.meningitis.org](http://www.meningitis.org)*



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